

car. He was going after her. She'd run off with more money than he could comfortably replace, and he wanted it back.

The address was in Loma Alta's Eastside — a graffiti-squiggled, bullet-riddled barrio. The landscape of her apartment building was bare dirt dotted with randomly-placed grey-green tumbleweeds. The spray paint on the front wall said "THE EASTSIDE LOCOS." The music from the courtyard pounded hard, detectable on a Richter Scale.

Ellis slammed his car door and walked into the complex. The music — rap, the deep-voiced male using the word 'fuck' and its derivatives generously — blasted from inside Number 7, Kim's place. Ellis walked past the emerald-green swimming pool. A wine bottle floated on the water's surface, bobbing in the small wavelets caused by the seismic effect of the electronic drumbeat. Ellis stepped inside the apartment. A dozen people — Kim and two of his closers among them — sat cross-legged around four cases of imported beer. Kim grinned and raised her beer to him. He crossed the room and bent over and grabbed her arm and screamed, "I WANT MY MONEY BACK." She couldn't hear him. She shook her head and said something he couldn't hear either and he grabbed her forearm and pulled her roughly to her feet.

A small African-American man with lightning bolts etched into the short hair on the sides of his head appeared out of thin air (it seemed) between them, facing Ellis and holding the cold metal cylinder of the barrel of a small-caliber hand-gun to the point of the night manager's chin. He backed Ellis out the door and over to the pool and in. Ellis remained submerged as six bullets blasted into the water's surface and swooped and swerved — their trajectories altered by the relatively high-viscosity fluid — over and under and around him as if guided by the hand of God himself. When the bullets, and the air bubbles they had forced into the water, were gone, Ellis surfaced like a crocodile — eyes and nostrils to the atmosphere. The black man was gone, and Kim Rubio sat on the edge of the pool, her Burger 'N' Run jeans rolled up to her knees and her legs dangling in the water. She smiled, a black-eyed angel, and holding up a bottle of the beer she said, "Hey Mr. Night Manager, you want a cold one?"

#### LAWN MAINTENANCE BLUES

Steve's game is lawn maintenance, mows and edges lawns for a couple of dozen folks in one of the rich neighborhoods in the foothills behind Loma Alta, where he met Elena, a pretty black-eyed Mexican girl, a live-in maid for one of



his customers, the Herzogs. It started with waves and smiles through the kitchen window (Elena at her sink, Steve with his weed-wacker) and evolved to a back-door flirtation, Elena passing Steve cokes from the Herzog's refrigerator, Steve making Elena laugh by murdering the Spanish language. From there the relationship moved to a cheap motel down on the coast route.

Carmen was on her way to work when she saw her live-in boy-friend Steve bump into the Ocean View Auto Court, lawn maintenance equipment bumping and rattling in his truck's bed as he bounced over the driveway and into the narrow courtyard. Carmen pulled to the curb and watched her man trot into the office and trot back out with a key. Then she watched him and a buxom little Mexican girl (couldn't be more than sixteen years old) skip, giggling and holding hands, into their dirty little love nest.

Wally Herzog, area manager for the Burger 'N' Run fast-food chain, was slumming, treating six of his store managers to a night of nasty, drunken high-jinks at The Mantrap, Loma Alta's infamous topless bar. He told his waitress Cindi (grabbed her by her matchstick wrist with his hairy hand) that he was interested in a table dance for his companions and himself, and he wanted the girl who had just finished a very grim-faced and listless performance on the stage, a very beautiful oriental girl. Cindi pulled away from Wally and said, "I don't think so, Champ. Carmen's havin' boy-friend trouble. I don't think she's in the mood for table dancin' tonight." Wally folded a twenty lengthwise, and Cindi let him stuff it into her bikini bottom. "Ask her anyway, cupcake," Wally grinned. "Tell her I'll make it worth her while."

Carmen had blown into work an hour late, her light brown neck mottled with a bumpy rash, her eyes red and swollen. When the bouncer Randall said, "We're a little tardy tonight, aren't we, Carmen?" Carmen spit out, "Fuck you, Randall," and stormed into the bathroom where she cried on Cindi's shoulder for half an hour, told her the sordid story of Steve and his little Mexican girl. So Cindi was hesitant to tell Carmen about Table Eight's request, but she knew Carmen, now that Steve wouldn't be helping out with the rent, was going to need the money. And the honcho at Table Eight was stupid and rich and drunk — a perfect mark.

Carmen squeezed a hundred bucks out of the honcho, then refused to face the table as she danced, so Wally said to his pals, "Watch this," as he slid off his chair, stuck his head — as Carmen spread her legs and gave her hips a little roll — under the g-strung buns, grabbed her thighs and stood tall, lifting Carmen onto his shoulders. His tablemates cheered. Carmen punched the top of his head



and clawed at his eyes, then hooked her ankles together and squeezed his temples tight in a scissors hold. Wally — blinded by thigh flesh now, feeling as if his head was about to pop — staggered away from the table and stumbled through the velvet curtains and out the door, where he spun drunkenly across the sidewalk and into the rush-hour traffic.

It was dusk and the light was bad, and Steve didn't have his mind a hundred percent on his driving. He didn't see the two totem-poled pedestrians in time. Elena's scream alerted him to something amiss. He slammed on his brakes; his two lawn mowers crashed unto the back of his cab, and he hit the man, and the man's naked rider landed hard on his wind-shield, the familiar breasts squashed flat on the glass, and Steve cried out, "OH SHIT!" as the torso slid down the glass and Carmen's snarling face dropped into view.

#### THE FRUMP

After her shift, Carmen scrubbed her face, pulled on a ratty sweat shirt and a baggy pair of jeans over her bikini and drove up the coast route to the Burger 'N' Run for a late night bite to eat before she went back to her apartment.

Without her make-up (pimples on her forehead, small acne pits on her cheeks) and wearing these figure-concealing clothes, she considered herself quite frumpy. And she was thirty-two, so why was the young Marine (a baby, looked like he was about nineteen) making goo-goo eyes at her over his bacon cheeseburger? He definitely looked too young to have seen her dance at the club. Maybe he was drunk. We're all beautiful when they're drunk.

Carmen bit her burger and a pickle slice slid out from between the buns and flopped down onto her chin. She fingered the green morsel into her mouth, but missed the spot of ketchup it had smeared onto her chin.

The Marine chuckled at her and slid out of his booth and approached her and said, "There's some ketchup, right here," pointing to his own chin. Carmen smiled and pulled a napkin from the dispenser and wiped her face clean, and said "Thanks," She couldn't believe what she said next, and she hoped it didn't leave her looking (in this babe's clear eyes) like some desperate and disgusting old lady. She said, "Sit down, bucko. I'll buy you a coke."

Later that night, after a long conversation — lots of eye contact, several beers, a bit of dope — Carmen